

## MESOLITHIC SITES IN SIBERIA

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In discussions of New World origins, American writers not infrequently make glib references to the "Mesolithic" of Siberia<sup>1</sup> without indicating just what they mean by this term. Inasmuch as the very existence of Mesolithic cultures in this area is open to question, we seem to be suffering either from terminological confusion or unfamiliarity with the facts. In view of the interest and importance of this subject for Americanists, some clarification seems called for.

To begin with, it should be stated flatly that not one of the familiar Mesolithic cultures of Europe or the Mediterranean area is known to occur in Siberia,<sup>2</sup> although they are represented in adjacent European Russia. In fact, the data suggest a complete absence of any contact between northern Europe and northern Asia in the post-glacial period -- at least until we approach the Neolithic horizon, which, in a boreal forest zone lacking food production, we will equate with the appearance of pottery. Traits typical for the classic Mesolithic cultures, insofar as they occur at all in Siberia, do not appear until then. Unlike Europe, there was no significant change in the distribution of human occupation in northern Asia during the post-glacial period. Nor does the area seem to have experienced the marked changes in environment, economy and material culture characteristic of Europe at this time.

Let us now survey the known Siberian remains that appear to be post-glacial but pre-ceramic (pre-Neolithic) -- remains to which the label "Mesolithic" has been or might be applied. It is only proper to point out that we know less of this stage than of any other in northern Asia, and that the available data are far from satisfactory.

First and foremost there are the sites of the final (third) stage of the Siberian Palaeolithic,<sup>3</sup> dated around 6000 B. C. and thus contemporary with Mesolithic phases in the west. Culturally, however, these sites are so closely linked with the preceding

Palaeolithic stages that they cannot justifiably be divorced from them. This final stage is not currently regarded as "Mesolithic" either by the Soviet archaeologists or by leading western experts such as Movius. We will therefore eliminate it from further consideration here.

Doubtless the site best known to western students is that of Ulan Khada on Lake Baikal, whose lowest level was formerly held to represent a pre-Neolithic phase. However, a recent study of the excavation records and collections leads Okladnikov to the conclusion that the site represents a single protracted occupation by a fully Neolithic group.<sup>4</sup> The same judgment seems to apply to the essentially similar level at the Tsar'-Devitsa site near Irkutsk.<sup>5</sup>

The lower Amur valley and the Maritime Province contain several very interesting sites classified by their discoverers as possibly (though not necessarily) Mesolithic. These are the oldest traces of human occupation yet discovered on the Pacific coast of Siberia. Unfortunately, no adequate descriptions have yet been published. Two of these sites -- Tigrovaia<sup>6</sup> and Osinovka<sup>7</sup> -- north of Vladivostok were examined in 1953-1955. The former is a small temporary campsite represented by a few chips and two artifacts -- apparently all surface finds. Of especial interest is a polyhedral obsidian burin which is quite similar in form, technique and size to burins found by Okladnikov in Outer Mongolia.<sup>8</sup> He also sees significant parallels between this and certain core-type artifacts from the University of Alaska campus. It is very difficult, of course, to date a site of this nature, especially when the Mongolian counterparts appear to be all surface material.

Osinovka is a stratified site. Several millenia are believed to separate the Neolithic occupation in the humus stratum from the underlying workshop with its pebble chopping tools of eastern and southeastern Asiatic affinities.<sup>9</sup> The stratigraphic conditions of the latter are not clearly described, but there seems no doubt of reasonable antiquity, and assignment to the end of the Palaeolithic is not ruled out.

The Tadusha River site is discussed in the Northeast Asia section of this issue.

Thought to be considerably later, perhaps not long antedating the local Neolithic (3rd-2nd millenia B.C.), are the sites in the vicinity of Khabarovsk:<sup>10</sup> by the railroad bridge over the Amur, and near the village of Osipovka. The former was excavated in 1926 by M. M. Gerasimov; the collections are located in the

Irkutsk and Khabarovsk museums. The latter was investigated by A. P. Okladnikov in 1935, the material being in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Leningrad. It is now undergoing further excavation which has placed it stratigraphically below the Neolithic horizon. The assemblage contains laurel-leaf points or knives with Solutrean-type retouch, end scrapers, blades and peculiar chipped axes. Of particular interest is the fact that this material has been considered by some to show more New World affinities than any other finds in Siberia.

There are a few sites in western and northern Siberia which contain an "archaic-looking" assemblage and seem to lack pottery. However, in no case is an age much greater than 4000 B.C. being currently claimed for them; even this cannot be substantiated. They are generally classified as "early" or "pre-ceramic" Neolithic -- which would seem to be a contradiction in terms. As one scholar has remarked, if we want to have a Mesolithic in Siberia, finds of this type should perhaps be labelled as such.

In this category should be placed Uolba Lake at the arctic circle on the Lena, Andreev Lake near Tiumen in western Siberia, and Shigir peat bog near Sverdlovsk in the Urals.

The lower levels at Uolba Lake<sup>11</sup> probably represent the oldest human occupation yet discovered in the far northeast of Siberia. However, the evidence adduced does not justify a date older than 2000 B.C. in the present writer's opinion. Although underlying a terminal Neolithic horizon, any attribution of greater antiquity is based on typological arguments and the possible absence of pottery.

The Andreev Lake I site<sup>12</sup> seems definitely non-ceramic, but lacks stratigraphic relationships. Its blade industry, with unifacially-worked points (including two asymmetric shouldered specimens), end scrapers and side blades, gives a definitely archaic impression, and lacks any parallels in the area except for a few undocumented finds at Palkino in the Urals, and the equally isolated Nizhne Adishchevo site on the European side. A guess-date of the 4th millenium B.C. is suggested by Chernetsov.

In the course of mining and peat-cutting over a long period of years at the extensive Shigir bog 65 km. north-northwest of Sverdlovsk,<sup>13</sup> vast amounts of prehistoric finds were brought to light, none of them properly documented. Represented in this material are all stages of the local Neolithic and metal cultures; but in addition there are about 3000 bone specimens of very

distinctive types which do not occur in any known site of these cultures. This group of finds is presumed to reflect a separate complex, sufficiently earlier so that its type artifacts had already gone out of use before the local full Neolithic -- a presumption strengthened by the circumstance that the closest analogies to these forms seem to occur only in such early Neolithic sites as Nizhne Veret'e in northern Russia, or even the Mesolithic Baltic site of Kunda. These type artifacts include three forms of bone arrowpoints (needle-shaped, side-bladed and the biconical "Shigir type") as well as harpoons. The complex is assumed to be pre-ceramic, since all pottery from the bog is identified with later stages. Raushenbakh carried out statistical studies utilizing both typology and color of the bone artifacts, combined with the limited data on provenience available, and believes that an earlier and a later phase of this Shigir culture can be distinguished. Older artifacts are described as being longer and more carefully made. A dating of around 4000 B.C. is suggested for the culture -- but this is merely a guess, albeit a restrained one. Attempts have been made in the past to assert a considerable antiquity (even back to 7000 B.C.), but they have found little support.

In general, however, there is little place for a Mesolithic stage in current Soviet thinking about cultural development in Siberia. The final Palaeolithic is thought to have evolved directly into the local Neolithic cultures, the process being so relatively rapid that not much evidence of transitional stages can be expected to remain. It is only in the Lake Baikal area, where the archaeological record is most detailed, that any serious effort has been made to demonstrate the existence of an intermediate phase that would best fulfill the role of a Siberian Mesolithic. The potential interest this may have for Americanists would seem to warrant a somewhat detailed examination of the evidence in this case.

Among the large number of Neolithic burials discovered in the Angara River valley, there are two which cannot be assigned to any recognized culture: one at Khinskaya Gorge, and a disturbed one at Chastye Gorge.<sup>14</sup> These are considered to represent an earlier period owing to their archaic-looking inventory. While a limited amount of generally similar material has turned up in the Baikal region from time to time, it has been either as surface finds or in a few undated sites of which little if anything is known.<sup>15</sup>

It is on the basis of these two burials, however, that Okladnikov has formulated the non-ceramic, microlithic Khina complex, which is viewed as a definite stage in the Baikal sequence, corresponding culturally to late Mesolithic manifestations in the west. The inadequate size of the sample hardly needs to be labored further.

The most distinctive feature of the artifact inventory is doubtless the two partially-retouched asymmetric shouldered arrowpoints. Nothing comparable has been found in any Neolithic context in the Baikal area; one specimen is, however, known from the Lena valley,<sup>16</sup> where it was associated with a typical Serovo (full Neolithic) knife. There have been occasional surface finds in the Angara valley and on Lake Baikal, and at Budun Bay they were associated with "other archaic flint artifacts of Mesolithic appearance"<sup>17</sup> -- but whether in the ground or on the surface is not clear. Sixteen such points have been collected from blowouts in Trans-Baikal, where they form part of a microlithic complex known as the "Daurian Culture";<sup>18</sup> the latter has apparently never been excavated in situ and its components therefore run the risk of merely fortuitous association. This complex is generally regarded as pre-ceramic, and includes bevelled points analogous to the so-called Tardenoisian of southern Russia. Stratigraphically, the "Daurian Culture" seems definitely to overlies the soil horizon containing the very different Selenga culture, which on typological grounds is assigned to the late Palaeolithic. (An evolutionary continuum would, incidentally, be difficult to demonstrate here). The same blowouts in which Daurian materials occur also contain (whether in some cases or regularly, is not clear) comb-stamped pottery and arrowpoints of classic Neolithic type. This association is dismissed as fortuitous on grounds of incongruity. Shouldered points also occur at Andreev Lake (supra) and Palkino (undocumented). A peculiar variety in which the lateral notch extends two-thirds of the overall length of the point is characteristic of the Neolithic Kel'teminar culture<sup>19</sup> of the Aral Sea region, which can probably be assigned to the 3rd millennium B.C.; identical points are also found on the sand dunes at Bazaikh<sup>20</sup> in the Yenisei valley, along with material of Serovo (last half of 3rd millennium) and later age. As an infallible index of Mesolithic antiquity, therefore, this type artifact leaves much to be desired.

Quite similar in technique, and evidently closely related, are the four other crude arrowpoints from the Khina burials.

These are also made of partially-retouched microblades and are thus regarded as somewhat reminiscent of the Mesolithic Swiderian points of eastern Europe. This type is more widely distributed.<sup>21</sup> In addition to being associated with the shouldered points in many places, it is found at intervals all across the steppe region from Manchuria to the Volga, sometimes accompanied by artifacts "of early microlithic type" -- but never, apparently, in datable associations. It also occurs in the Baikal region in Neolithic contexts of Serovo stage or younger (e.g. Ulan Khada, Shestakovo), where it is explained as a "survival", or as due to the lingering influence of an ancient technical tradition. This may well be the case, but again we can justifiably question the validity of employing these "archaic" points as a major criterion for the antiquity of the Khina complex.

Strikingly different from the foregoing are the two well-made bifacial flint dart points. These are said to be reminiscent of certain laurel-leaf points from local terminal Palaeolithic sites such as Verkholskaia Gora; but as far as one can judge, they would be equally at home in many Neolithic assemblages.

The remaining diagnostic element in the Khina material consists of the three long (c. 8"), slender, polished slate pointed objects. These are unique in the area, and thus particularly emphasize the isolated status of these two burials. This isolation is assumed to have chronological significance, but one wonders if it could not with equal validity be ascribed to an alien intrusion.

A number of blades (some retouched) completes the inventory for all practical purposes. The bulk of it is thus microlithic in character.

The contents of the two burials hence offer no convincing basis for comparative dating, despite a superficially Mesolithic appearance. There is no stratigraphic or similar evidence of relative age, and the construction of the graves does not seem to differ from that of the local Neolithic. The absence of pottery is not necessarily significant, since it apparently is not found in burials of the latest of the three Neolithic stages. If the Khina complex does represent an intermediate evolutionary stage between the terminal Palaeolithic and oldest Neolithic (Isakovo) of the area, it should reasonably be required to display some affinities; in actuality, the Khina artifacts seem to have little in common with either. There are no local antecedents for the most striking traits -- the microlithic arrowpoints -- and only

the two bifacial dart points have any apparent Palaeolithic analogies.<sup>22</sup> Nor do any of the types even foreshadow the distinctive features of the local Neolithic. In short, even if the Khina complex should prove to have a valid existence, it is floating in time in its present form.

We may sum up by saying that as of now there is no indisputable published evidence of a Mesolithic stage in Siberian pre-history.<sup>23</sup> There is only a limited number of widely-scattered unrelated sites that may prove to be pre-Neolithic. Of greatest potential interest to Americanists are those in the Soviet Far East. The results of current field work here will be eagerly awaited.

#### NOTES

1. E.g. Collins, 1953, p. 201; Rainey, 1953, p. 45.
2. Siberia is here defined as that portion of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic lying east of the Ural watershed.
3. The most recent discussions of the Siberian Palaeolithic in English are in Movius, 1953, and Chard, 1958. Type site of Stage III is Verkholskaia Gora near Irkutsk.
4. Okladnikov, 1950, pp. 53, 98-104, 108-111.
5. Idem., p. 114.
6. Okladnikov, 1955, p. 4.
7. Idem., pp. 4-5; Okladnikov, 1956, p. 42.
8. Illustrated in Okladnikov, 1954, p. 234 (left-hand figure; Mongolian specimen on the right).
9. Illustrated, idem., p. 233.
10. Information supplied by the excavators. The scattered references in the literature scarcely warrant citation.
11. Summarized with illustrations in Chard, 1956.
12. Chernetsov, 1953, pp. 25-27 (illustrations).
13. Raushenbakh, 1956, pp. 86-115. Illustrations: fig. 22 and Briusov, 1952, fig. 32.
14. Okladnikov, 1950, pp. 157-165; illustrations on pp. 159 and 161.



15. Examples illustrated idem., p. 163.
16. Chard, 1956, fig. 134: 24.
17. Okladnikov, 1950, p. 158; illustrations p. 163 (lower rows).
18. Idem., pp. 158-162; illustrations p. 163 (upper two rows).
19. Examples illustrated in Tolstov, 1948, fig. 3 and plate 11.
20. Okladnikov, 1957, pp. 49-50.
21. Okladnikov, 1950, pp. 158-162.
22. Generalized microlithic elements such as side blades do occur, it is true, as far back as Stage II of the Siberian Palaeolithic, but are in the minority. Significant parallels are lacking with the preponderantly microlithic Khina assemblage. Such elements are also found in the local Neolithic.
23. Or in that of neighboring Mongolia either. Okladnikov re-examined Nelson's stratified site at Shabarakh-Usu in 1949 and found that the lower ("Mesolithic") horizon contained net-impressed pottery analogous to that of the Baikal Neolithic (Vestnik Drevnei Istorii, 1951, No. 4, p. 169). This was the only instance in which the supposedly Mesolithic materials had been found in situ in Mongolia.

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